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THE NEW BYRON *

The two books whose titles appear in the foot-note compel a revision of our estimate of Lord Byron both as poet and as man. Sincerity is the first essential of any great work of literature or art; and for almost a hundred years Byron has been looked upon as a *poseur*. We heard the cry of his bitter agony, fierce and passionate as the voice of the chained Prometheus when the eagle gnawed his vitals; but we looked in vain for a reason. We saw a boyhood love for Miss Chaworth, a scandalous flirtation with Lady Caroline Lamb, a loveless marriage followed by a speedy separation, a succession of light amours whose only aim was pleasure; and this cry of anguish from one pursuing the primrose path seemed but an affectation. Now at last the veil has been lifted; and Byron, once considered a hollow rake, stands out as one of the great lovers of history, along with Dante and Petrarch. Thanks to the researches of Mr. Edgcumbe, we now know that the love of Byron for Mary Chaworth was not merely a boyish fancy; that when she was separated from her boorish husband they met again. The embers of the old love burst into passionate flame, and for a while they were happy. But her conscience gave her no rest, and at length she broke from him. The terrible rending apart of hearts so closely united drove her to insanity, while he sought solace for his grief in the wild outpourings of the *Giaour*, *Lara*, the Fourth Canto of *Childe Harold*, the lines to *Thyrza*, and in *Manfred*. Not only was his heart wrung to agony, but his conscience was troubled. Most men who violate the Seventh Commandment consider it but a jest. Not so Byron. The guilt of it seems in this instance to have oppressed him, though he was callous in so many other cases, probably because it had here resulted in the madness of the woman whom he adored. He could not hide his pain nor could he reveal the cause; and so, for almost a century he has passed for an affected

* *Byron: The Last Phase*, by Richard Edgcumbe (Charles Scribner's Sons); *The Love Affairs of Lord Byron*, by Francis Gribble (Same publishers).

fellow who, while enjoying all the pleasures of life, pretended to be suffering all its woe. He was like a friend of mine who died slowly of an inward cancer; and because the doctors lacked the insight to ascertain his true condition, they allowed him to pass as a hypochondriac, whose expressions of suffering were but a proof of weakness.

Now that we know the truth we must look upon Byron with other eyes. We must realize that that cry of bitter anguish that rings through all his verse is no pretence, that it is one of those mighty cries of a breaking heart that echo down the ages; that the chambers of his soul were not filled merely with fleeting forms of passing fancies, but that the ghost of a great murdered passion stalked moaning through it. When we comprehend this, his poetry assumes another aspect. It is not the peevish complaining of a discontented dandy; it is the passionate outcry of a strong man whose heart is bleeding.

It is rather strange that Englishmen and Americans have both been so blind to this. Ordinarily, when we see a man crying out in pain, with the cold sweat of agony upon his brow, we admit that he is suffering, though we may not perceive the cause. But, at least since Lord Macaulay's fierce attack upon him, Englishmen have been content to call Byron a *poseur*, and so to dismiss him from their serious consideration; and we Americans, who, despite our vast material progress, are in matters of literature prone to follow England, have accepted their verdict. Very different has it been on the Continent. From Cadiz to Moscow none has questioned the genuineness of that despairing cry that rings through Byron's poems, and by common consent he has been proclaimed the greatest of English poets after Shakespeare.

Poets are usually most admired by their own countrymen, and the applause which they receive abroad is but the faint echo of that which resounds in their native land. This is natural, for the full music of verse is only perceived by those who have spoken the language from childhood. The English, however, have as a whole hated Byron. The reason is not far to seek. Their splendid civilization, in many respects the greatest that the world has ever seen, is built up on many conventions. All

of these Byron outraged. They are intensely loyal, even to their most unworthy sovereigns, and Byron's frightful lampoon on George III and George IV in the *Vision of Judgment* was an unpardonable offence. They are an extremely religious people, and the questions that the poet asks the Almighty in *Cain* aroused their bitterest resentment. They are very tolerant of immorality, if a veil of decency is thrown over it; but if it is publicly flaunted, it cannot be forgiven; and Byron never made an effort to cloak his profligacy. So, when living, they drove him from their midst, and when he died, they denied him the glorious sepulture in the Parthenon that the Greeks would have given him; and instead of burying him in Westminster with their illustrious dead, they hid him away in an obscure country church, and started a crusade not merely against his memory as a man, but against his standing as a poet. As the passions of revolt and disbelief that surge through his resounding verse were hateful to them, they have sought to close the ears of their youth to his message by persuading them that after all he is but a sorry writer. So persistently have Englishmen adopted this tone since the day when Macaulay proclaimed Byron an empty *poseur*, that admiration for him is accounted conclusive proof of bad taste. Lord Macaulay was a great man, but he has his limitations. His own verse proves his lack of the poetic instinct; but he never doubted the infallibility of his judgment. That Goethe, the greatest poet since Shakespeare, should have proclaimed Byron a greater still, did not give him pause. Lord Melbourne said that he wished he could be as cocksure of one thing as Macaulay was of everything. The great essayist was equally certain that Troy never existed and that Byron was an empty *poseur*; and he persuaded almost all England until Schliemann and his successors and Mr. Edgcumbe proved the futility of his arguments.

It may be said that Shelley is even more in revolt against Church and State, and that he is held in higher esteem every day: but Shelley appeals only to a few choice spirits, and the supporters of established institutions know that they stand in no peril from his ethereal blows. Besides, while he rails against the Church, his spirit is essentially Christian, with the same infinite

pity for the weak and the down-trodden, the same passionate desire for the elevation of mankind. A majority of those who love him are religious men, who find in him an eloquent, though sometimes misguided, expression of their own ideals. Byron's attitude is that of a proud aristocrat who, while he hates the oppressor, looks down with scant admiration on the mass of humanity; while the audacious questions that he hurls into the face of the Almighty cry for an answer in the breasts of all who listen.

Other reasons there are why Byron has lost favor with English-speaking people. Different standards have intervened. Tennyson and Browning have come upon the scene. For the votaries of the latter there is nothing in Byron to attract. His style, clear-cut as a bronze tablet, presents no problems to solve, no obscurities to unravel, and they find him without interest. Byron, the poet of passion and power, is equally offensive to the devotees of Tennyson, the poet of delicate fancy and far-sought romance. Byron makes no verse like Keats's exquisite lines—

Charmed magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn,—

the ideal utterance of the Tennysonian school. He seeks not recondite phrases of fastidious perfection, and so they find him commonplace. Yet the want of these exquisite forms of utterance is no fault of his. All excellences cannot be combined in one person. You cannot give to the oak the graces of the fern any more than you can join the serene beauty of Raphael to the tortured strength of Michelangelo. All that we can ask is that a man shall excel in his own way. None belittles Velasquez or Rembrandt because they lack Titian's sense of physical beauty, or Shakespeare because he wants the chiseled perfection of Sophocles. The highly elaborated forms of Tennyson are no more suited to express Byron's message than the graceful arias of the Italian opera to utter the frenzy of passion that surges through the wailing strings of *Tristan and Isolde*. Both are good, and he who can see merit in only a single style lacks something that he will never miss, but which leaves him poor indeed.

Another trouble is that Byron is the poet of youth, and it is men of mature years who sway the critical utterances of the literary world. By the time they reach their commanding positions the volcanic passions to which he appeals have died out, and they look back upon the time when he could stir their hearts as a period of immaturity; not realizing how glorious a thing is youth, how splendid it is to be able to voice its hopes, its aspirations, its despair, even its follies.

These are some of the reasons why Byron is so little esteemed at home. To what, then, does he owe his exalted rank in foreign lands?

In the first place, he is the greatest of all the poets of passion. He has not Shakespeare's subtle analysis of the springs of human action and emotion; but in the direct, vehement, instantly effective expression of passion in verse he has no rival. And passion is the most vital of all things, the source of our keenest pleasures and of our bitterest pains. Poetry has been called the language of passion. If so, the most passionate of poets should be the greatest. Because we could see no basis for this passionate utterance, we looked upon it with distrust. Despite its volcanic intensity, it seemed that it must be a shallow pretence. Now that we know that it sprang from a broken heart, torn by anguish and remorse, it has a different ring. When we read Byron's verses, knowing his mighty love for Mary Chaworth, the rending asunder of their hearts and the madness that came to her because of the separation, it all sounds real—the most fearful cry that a broken heart has ever sent up to God.

Byron, too, is the foremost of all the poets of nature. In descriptive power he has no rival. Most descriptive poetry is hard reading. Byron is almost alone in making it alive. And his descriptions go to the soul of things. The Fourth Canto of *Childe Harold* is still the best guide to Italy. Nowhere else do we find the very soul of the land so revealed; nor can we think of the battle of Waterloo without his lines coming to mind, or of Switzerland without repeating to ourselves the stanzas addressed to Lake Lemán. And where since the dawn of poetry has the ocean received such a tribute as the closing lines of *Childe*

Harold? Indeed, almost all his poems give us descriptions scarcely less felicitous.

It is very difficult to be truly moving in verse. The feeling of pity is based on a vivid realization of another's pain: and the artificiality of metrical forms makes this sense of reality hard to attain, especially where the shackles of rhyme are added. Probably no one ever shed a tear over one of the innumerable deaths in the magic pages of Keats or Shelley or Tennyson. They excite but an exquisite sadness, which is rather a pleasure than a pain. Byron, however, achieved pathos of the most poignant kind. He who can read the *Prisoner of Chillon* or the death of Haidee for the first time without a tear in his eye and a sob in his throat is not to be envied. Only the prison scene in *Faust* excels these in pathos.

He is the greatest satirist that ever expressed himself in poetry. From the fierce, blasting satire of the *Vision of Judgment* to the keen witticisms of *Beppo* and *Don Juan* he stands unrivaled. Over no other poetry can one laugh so much or laugh so bitterly. Only in Swift can we find an equal to its bitterness, only in Voltaire can we find a rival to its wit; and neither of these approaches him when they put on the fetters of verse.

No other English poet save Shakespeare covers so wide a field. He attempted all poetic styles, and was successful in all. It is said that he was not dramatic, and it must be admitted that most of his dramas lack vitality, and display little capacity for the analysis of character. Still, *Manfred* and *Cain* are great dramatic works; not suited indeed to production on the stage, but dramatic in form and essence.

It used to be thought that after the lapse of a century the position of an author or an artist would be secure; that by that time the clamor of praise or blame that his contemporaries set up would be forgotten; that he would be judged, and placed in his final niche in the Halls of Fame. Now we know that nothing can be more fallacious, that each generation summons before its bar the men of the past, and pronounces upon them a new judgment. "It is a hard thing," said the Elder Cato, when brought to trial for deeds done in his youth, "for a man to defend himself before the men of another generation."

Still, now that almost a century has elapsed since Byron's death, and we are placed in possession of the secret that he guarded with such jealous care ; we in America who have no reason to share the prejudices of his countrymen, whose most sacred institutions he outraged or called in question—we should be in a position to give to one of the greatest of poets the tribute of admiration due to transcendent genius.

GEORGE B. ROSE.

Little Rock, Arkansas.